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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: Rutshuru incident exaggerated, but North Kivu tensions remain high

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

Note: Following report was submitted by Political Counselor David Brown, currently on TDY in Goma.
End note.

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Initial reports of FARDC-CNDP combat in the North Kivu town of Rutshuru November 21 exaggerated the scale and the impact of the fighting. Claims by both sides that CNDP forces had occupied the town were false. Eyewitness reports confirm pro-Nkunda fighters attacked a FARDC base there early in the afternoon. Shooting ended soon afterward following successful appeals by MONUC's Kiwanja base commander. Overheated reactions to the incident illustrate the tensions pervasive in the southern half of the province. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) A visiting assessment team, including representatives from the U.S. and UK missions, was present at the MONUC base in Kiwanja north of Rutshuru town north of Goma during a clash by FARDC and CNDP forces in the town November 21. The team heard a loud explosion at around 12:30 pm during a briefing by the base's commanding officer, Lt. Col. R. Parmar. Parmar was informed by telephone that an RPG round had fallen in the town and called an end to the briefing. As MONUC troops deployed in defensive positions around the camp, the team observed a stream of schoolchildren rushing down the road from the high ground to the west. During the next 60 minutes or so it heard individual bursts of automatic weapons fire, but observed no signs of fighting or generalized panic.

¶3. (SBU) Congolese officials were less restrained. MONUC-Goma head of office Ulli Mwambulutuku told Goma OIC November 23 he had received frantic calls from the North Kivu governor and provincial assembly president appealing for MONUC to "do something." He noted that neither had placed similar calls to North Kivu Regional Military Commander General Vainqueur Mayala. The French political counselor in Kinshasa and the Belgian consul in Bukavu reported hysterical calls from the Rutshuru territorial administrator claiming that CNDP forces had taken the town. Nkunda boasted to both Mwambulutukulu and a gubernatorial counselor that his forces had indeed taken the town, but were withdrawing to save the population. The FARDC command in Goma triumphantly claimed it had beaten back a CNDP assault on the town and killed 20 insurgents.

¶4. (SBU) In fact, residents had begun walking back to the town along the same road they had fled by the time the assessment team left under MONUC escort some 90 minutes after the initial explosion. The situation in the center of town was much as it had been when the team was interviewing IDPs there two hours earlier. The team

observed no signs of combat or CNDP troops.

15. (SBU) MONUC-Goma's chief intelligence officer, Lt. Col. Sandeep Jaswal, told Goma OIC November 23 that CNDP fighters had attacked the FARDC battalion headquarters in Rutshuru, and that FARDC troops had returned fire. He said Parmar had succeeded in bringing the shooting to an end and withdrawal by CNDP forces from the town through telephone appeals to the respective commanders to cease fighting in a populated area.

16. (SBU) Jane Coyne of Medecins Sans Frontieres, which operates the town's only hospital, noted November 22 that the battalion headquarters had formerly served the same function for the Bravo mixed brigade and is located 200 yards from the hospital. She said doctors there treated 32 gunshot victims there following the clash. All but three were civilians, most of them lightly wounded but including one fatality. An AP reporter who visited the town November 25 told Goma OIC of seeing several bullet holes in the headquarters building but little other obvious damage.

17. (SBU) The fighting in Rutshuru had been preceded by an early morning clash to the south of the town. IDP's in Rutshuru, as well as Parmar, had told the assessment team that a clash of limited duration had taken place. Jaswal said this had been a FARDC attack at Rumangabo in the CNDP-controlled enclave to the west of the Goma-Rutshuru road near the border with Uganda. There were no apparent signs of this clash when the traveled on the same road in the late morning.

18. (SBU) Comment: FARDC and CNDP forces are currently probing and testing the other side in limited engagements in the strategic Goma-Rutshuru corridor. The atmosphere in the southern half of the province continues to be tense, but the frantic reaction of Congolese officials to the Rutshuru incident and attempts by both sides to use it as propaganda are, unfortunately, barriers to a

KINSHASA 00001305 002 OF 002

better understanding of events here. End comment.